

# From isolation to integration: Abi's story



Abi is 17-years-old and has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis. When her family relocated from Dorset to Derbyshire, Abi had to move from a specialist Learning Centre into a mainstream school that was unable to adequately support her socialisation and high anxiety difficulties. Finding herself bullied and humiliated by her new peer group, Abi withdrew from formal education, her self-esteem at an all-time low, unsure of her future and without qualifications.

I met Abi at a local coffee morning. She had recently dropped out of school and although she wanted to communicate, it was very difficult. Two words at a time and no eye contact was her best effort. When I saw her on subsequent occasions she would wave or say hi, but no other communication was offered.

A grant enabled Abi to attend Lowberdale Farm ([lowberdalefarm.org.uk](http://lowberdalefarm.org.uk)), a project that started as the vision of a local Christian farmer and came to fruition with Christian volunteers who shared that vision. Volunteers are from different churches, and bring different skills, but all have the same desire to put their faith into action. By reflecting God's love of all creation, the project helps young people understand their own value, grow as individuals and build social skills through farming practice.

For two days a week Abi undertakes activities including feeding, mucking out, lambing, shearing, administering wormer, vaccinating sheep, fencing and other general farm duties. Every lunchtime the whole team sit down to a meal together. This is a time that Abi really loves; it gives her a chance to talk, share and, most importantly, laugh and develop relationships with the care workers and other young people on the farm. The experience affirms her as a valued part of a team – something she craved – which in turn boosts her self-esteem.

Three months after starting at the farm, I saw Abi walking through the village with a lovely Collie puppy. Abi told me how she loved attending the farm, how she had learnt to do so many things and how she now had her own hens and supplied eggs to several people in the village. Abi talked about her puppy and how she was training her and most of all how excited she was for lambing at Lowberdale to start because she had been asked her to help. After 20 minutes I had to excuse myself to get on with some work!

I met up with Abi on the farm during lambing and it was clear that she was thriving, working hard and thoroughly enjoying herself. A few weeks later when I was on the farm for sheering, Abi was instructing me in the preparation for the day. As we worked we talked about life. Abi's family now rent some land from a local farmer where she is raising six cade – orphaned – lambs and still keeps her own hens. Abi is hoping she will be able to start an agricultural course in the near future.

Abi's mum has seen the impact the farm has had on her daughter: 'Abi now feels her opinion matters and that people are willing to listen to her ideas. The time at Lowberdale could not have come at a more opportune time in Abi's life and has made a significant and positive difference to her outlook on life and her future.'

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